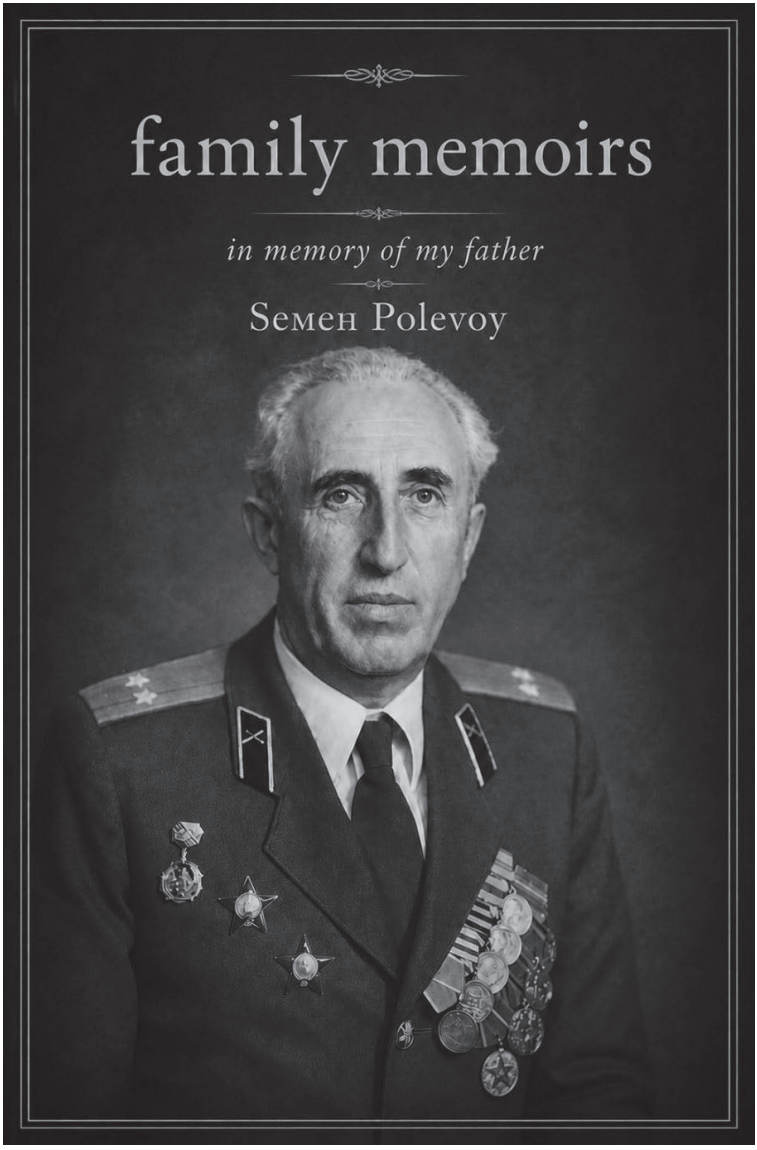


In Memory of My Father: A Family Memoir

Telling the story of my family, of my parents, and of the past in general is not easy. It was a time marked by two great wars — World War I and World War II. Because of this, much of our family history has not been preserved in exact facts, but only in stories, in legends. I cannot be certain that everything truly happened as it was said. But this is how it came down to me — through memory, through words, through fragments of stories.

I will begin with one of these family legends.

It was said that my father's grandfather had eight sons. When his wife was giving birth to their eighth child, she died. Sometime later, he remarried — a widow who had four daughters. That is how a large and complicated family was formed, where children from two marriages grew up together.

There is another story. One of those sons, in 1915, did not want to serve in the Tsar's army and emigrated to the United States. Almost nothing is known about his fate. Many years later, when I myself came to America, I tried to find relatives. I discovered that around 150 people carry the last name Polevoy. I tried contacting some of them, but once I received a cold reply: the person wrote that they did not care about any relatives. After that, I stopped trying.

Later, after the Russian Civil War, one of my grandfather's brothers, whose name was Yevsey, received a letter from the United States — from that very brother who had emigrated. They corresponded for some time, until around 1930. After that, it became dangerous. Contact with foreigners could result in being accused of treason and receiving up to 25 years in prison. Fear gradually became part of life.

Fear was everywhere in the country. People were afraid to speak to each other, afraid of saying even a single unnecessary word — because a word could lead to prison.

The courts operated quickly and harshly. So-called "troikas" — three-member extrajudicial tribunals — handled cases. There were usually no lawyers. A case could be decided in 15–20 minutes, and a person could receive a sentence of up to 25 years in prison.

The country needed labor — not free labor, but forced labor. Prisoners were used to build military factories, railroads, and infrastructure. All of this was done without pay. People said the country had become a land of slaves: some were imprisoned, others lived in fear.

Even jokes of that time reflected this reality — they were told only in whispers. They often referred to the methods of interrogation used by the secret police (the KGB).

They said that in Egypt, a new pyramid had been discovered, and inside it a mummy was found. Scientists could not determine who it was or when it lived. So they invited specialists from the Soviet Union. Three men arrived, entered the pyramid, and "worked" with the mummy for several days. Then they came out and announced at a press conference: it was Ramses V or VI, who lived in the 17th century BC.

The journalists asked:

"How did you find that out?"

The answer was short:

"He confessed."

This joke reflected a bitter truth of the time — confessions were often forced.

A little more is known about my grandmother. Her name was Edya. She was born into a relatively well-off family: her father was a forester, and she had four sisters. It was believed that she grew up in good condition in part because she had studied piano for many years.

There is a family story about her.

My grandfather — my father's father — had a good sense of humor. One day he persuaded a relative named Mura to tell my grandmother that he had bought her a piano. She panicked: there was no space for it in their small room. It caused quite a commotion. When my grandfather came home, he certainly got in trouble. But the story remained a warm family memory.

My grandfather's family Edya, Maya, Solomon and Joseth 1929

I also heard that my grandmother had a sister who lived in Odessa.

I know very little about my grandfather. He died when I was only one year old. I only know that he worked for many years as a foreman at a factory.

My Father's Story

My father was born in May 1922. At birth, he was given the name Solomon. His father's name was Joseph.

These were difficult times, and his parents worked several jobs to support the family.

Seven years later, his sister Maya was born.

My father was a strong and intelligent child. He did well in school and played soccer — as much as it was possible, because a ball was a rare thing in those days.

He loved movies. When the first sound films appeared, he watched them many times. For example, he saw the film Chapaev more than ten times.

In 1939, he entered an artillery school in Leningrad. He wanted to become a military officer

— like many boys of that time.

Cadets 1940, my father second left

In June 1941, the war began. They were commissioned as lieutenants and sent to newly formed units. My father was sent to Kuibyshev, to a heavy artillery brigade.

On November 7, 1941, his brigade took part in the military parade on Red Square in Moscow, and from there they were sent directly to the front.

My father rarely spoke about the war. But once I found a newspaper clipping describing how Lieutenant Polevoy coordinated artillery fire from guns located about twenty kilometers from the front line. For accurate fire, he was awarded the Order of the Red Star.

One of the few stories he shared stayed with me. They were in a dugout when one of the soldiers stepped outside. At that very moment, a shell exploded nearby, and the full force of the blast hit him. The others survived.

In April, 1945, his brigade was withdrawn from Koenigsberg to take part in a parade in Moscow. By that time, he had already spent nearly three years at the front.

Captain Semyon Polevoy and his battery

My father, top right 1945

My Mother and Her Family

After the war, in the summer of 1945, my father came to Kyiv on leave.

At that same time, my future mother, Leah, came to his family home to learn about his fate.

They met there by chance, but the meeting turned out to be fateful.

Their earlier feelings returned, and before long, they were married.

My mother grew up in a large family — three girls and two boys — and she was the youngest. She studied very well and graduated from school with a gold medal, which gave her the right to enter a university without exams.

Yakov and Ester, my mother's parents

date unknown

But the war interrupted her studies.

At that time, my mother was nineteen years old. One day she came to visit her older sister Nina, whose husband was already at the front.

At that time, the evacuation of military families was more organized, and there was an opportunity to leave immediately.

Nina said to her:

“Liya, you are not going anywhere. You are leaving with us.”

No packing, no belongings — they simply left.

That is how my mother ended up in Saratov with Nina and her children — ten-year-old Semyon and one-year-old Marik.

There, my mother worked as a waitress in an officers’ dining hall. It was very hard work, and she would come home completely exhausted.

At the beginning of the war, a tragedy struck the family. My mother’s brother, Abrasha, was drafted into the army defending Kyiv. In September, the army was defeated: some soldiers were taken prisoner, others scattered. He returned home. But he was betrayed by the building caretaker — as a Jew — and was killed at Babi Yar, one of the sites of the mass extermination of Jews during the Holocaust.

Another brother, Rafa, volunteered for the front, was captured, escaped, and wandered through the forests for about ninety days before reaching his own forces. In 1944, as a valuable specialist, he was recalled to the rear.

Before the war, in 1936, he had graduated with honors from the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute. Other graduates were assigned to high positions, but he was sent to Saratov as a simple engineer. This was an example of state antisemitism.

After the War

After their marriage, my parents moved to Skopin.

Semen and Liza 1945

When receiving new documents, they made the difficult decision to change their names, fully aware that both everyday and state antisemitism existed in the country. Thus, Solomon became Semyon, and Leah became Liza.

I was born there, and later my brother Sasha.

Life was difficult. My father worked constantly, and we rarely saw him. But there were also bright moments — trips to military training grounds, childhood in the forests, and fishing with my father.

In 1957, my father went to study in Leningrad. It was a short but happy time for our family. However, after eight months, we returned to Skopin.

In the late 1950s, during Khrushchev's reforms, a rapid reduction of the army began. In peacetime, an army of five million was considered excessive, and many officers were discharged into the reserves.

My father was still relatively young — about thirty-nine years old. But by that time, his health had already begun to decline: his ulcer worsened after the war, and he had heart problems. Continuing military service became increasingly difficult. He was not released immediately, but eventually he made the decision to leave the army and retire.

In 1961, our entire family moved to Kyiv. My father was forty-one years old at the time, and of course he wanted to work. When asked about his education and skills, he would answer:

"I can fire any kind of artillery."

Understanding that he needed a civilian profession, he enrolled in an automotive college and successfully graduated three years later. He then began working as a dispatcher in a taxi depot. The job was very stressful, and the effects of war and military service took their toll: in 1966, he suffered his first heart attack.

After that, he left this job and moved to a calmer position in a workplace made up mostly of retired officers. He worked there for many years. However, his heart problems worsened, and in 1988, he passed away.

Conclusion

This is only a small part of our family history. The twentieth century destroyed much — wars, fear, repression, and forced migrations. As a result, our family lost its roots and many of its connections.

Our generation can also be called a "lost generation." The term first appeared after World War I, when millions of young people lost their sense of direction and purpose. It was later widely used in literature.

We grew up without religion, without traditions, without a stable spiritual foundation.

In Kyiv, where hundreds of thousands of Jews lived, there was only one small synagogue with about one hundred seats. Even going there was dangerous, as anyone who attended could come under surveillance.

I believe that it may not matter which religion a person follows. What matters is having a moral foundation, because all religions share fundamental principles: do not steal, do not kill, honor your parents, and respect others.

Memory of family is also part of that foundation.

To My Children

My dear children,

I wrote this so that you would know your family better than we did.

Wherever you may live — remember your roots. Pass this memory on.

And most importantly, may your lives be free from war, hunger, and the suffering that we and our ancestors endured.

historical/documentary

Father and Grandfather 1939

My Mama and I 1947

My mama, Dad and I

My brother Alex and I

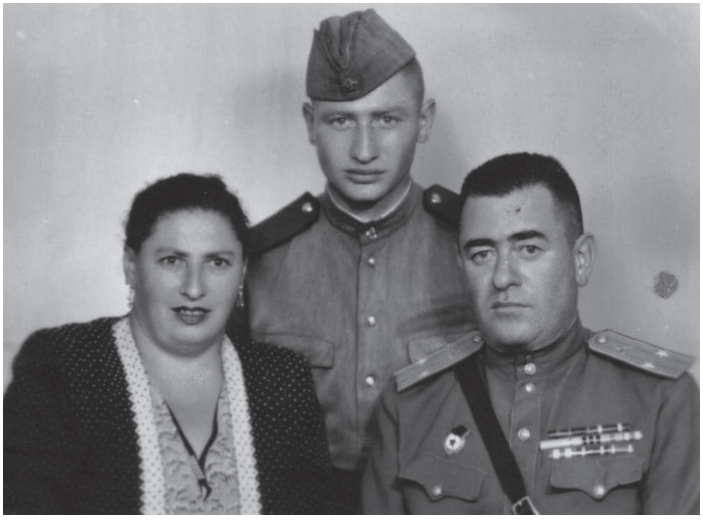
My father, 1945

Gorokhavetsky camp, 1951

Maya, 1940

Rafa, 1944

Nina and Boris, Rafa's kids 1951



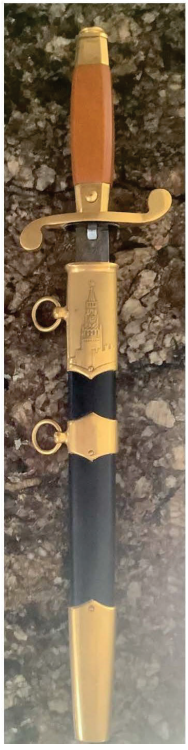
Nina, my mother's sister, with Grisha and Senya 1951

Gorokhovetsky Camp, 1951

My father in parade uniform with ceremonial dagger, 1956

Rosa, my mother's sister with Alex and Igor 1957

Grandparents Plotkin and Marik Nina's son 1958



My Father's ceremonial dagger worn with his dress uniform

My father's grave Kyiv

In loving memory of my father

Semen Polevoy

1922–1988

compiled and edited by Vlad Polevoy